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SEPTEMBER 1991

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MEMO FROM THE EDITOR

Go ahead, feel good about yourself

First of all, I want to thank you for earning so much more money this year. We were running out of depressing titles for our annual report. Consider this stretch:

- 1986: "Earnings: Hunting bigger gain"
- 1987: "Earnings: Will they dance again?"
- 1988: "Earnings: Sparce growth in a dry year"

By 1989, we gave up being descriptive altogether, and just labeled the issue "Earnings." What a delight to finally be able to say, without any hesitation, "Earnings are up."

As you'll see in this month's cover story, Don Dooley says the credit goes to your attitude, and if you want to make even more money, that's where you should look. Why not, then, take the good news about your income and run with it? Use the momentum to feel good about what you do, to join your clients in their belief that you perform a valuable, life-giving service. From this moment on, give yourself a break and stop making decisions for the people who entrust their animals to you. Take confidence in your abilities, and offer every client you see today *everything* his or her animal needs to lead a longer, healthier life.

Don't let this opportunity to change your attitude pass you by. If your income is below the figures shown in this issue, now you know what's possible. If your income surpasses our tables, keep up the good work—we plan to write a positive headline next year, too. And if you need one more boost, see page 10 for excerpts from the speech ABC news correspondent Roger Caras gave at the recent AVMA meeting. He doesn't mince words in his admiration for veterinarians—or in his belief that your self-esteem isn't where it should be.

As he said, "Hey people, if you are not very, very proud of your profession and your accomplishments, and are not really gung-ho, bright-eyed, and bushy-tailed about the future of your profession, how are outsiders supposed to feel about you?" Don't give those outsiders an opportunity to feel anything but thanks and admiration.

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Rebecca R. Turner

veterinary economics

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Volume 32, Number 9

Medical Economics Publishing Co.

EARNINGS ARE UP!

George himself might smile at this year's earnings report, which shows veterinary income on the rise for all practitioner types. Is your income on —or due for—a ride to a higher level?

It's that time again—time for our annual report on veterinary income. As you probably know by now, earnings are up nationwide. It's also time for you and your colleagues to ask how we obtain this information—and why it may not reflect what is happening in your own practice.

Every fact and figure in this report is based on what 1,200 practicing veterinarians told us about themselves and about their income. The survey, commissioned annually by VETERINARY ECONOMICS, is conducted by Signet Research Inc., a New Jersey company touted as "a shining leader in the marketing research business."

If you don't fit neatly into the charts, keep in mind that the figures are *averages*. For example, the mean net income for all practitioners is $56,700, but as you'll see in the chart on page 45, there are doctors earning less than $15,000, more than $125,000, and every amount in between. In other words, no matter where you stand, you're not alone.

To conduct the annual survey, Signet began with a list of 2,500 veterinarians, selected on an nth name basis from our subscriber lists. The doctors were chosen both by practice type and region: we sent surveys to small animal, large animal, mixed animal, and equine doctors; and to those in each of the regions outlined on page 35.

Signet mailed the questionnaires on April 4, 1991, with a $1 incentive and a postage-paid reply envelope. Eighty were returned as undeliverable, leaving a net mailing of 2,420 surveys. Signet sent a second mailing to non-respondents on May 17, this time without the incentive. By mid-June, 1,200 returns had been received, for a 50-percent response rate. The returns were then weighted to reflect the proportionate composition of the VETERINARY ECONOMICS circulation by practice type and geographic region. The results can be accepted as accurate to within ±3 percent, at a 95-percent confidence level.

Who told us what?

Who are the veterinarians who responded to our survey? Most of them are men (76.5 percent), although the percentage of women in practice is clearly on the rise. In VETERINARY ECONOMICS' 1985 survey report, for example, only 12.1 percent of the responses came from women veterinarians.

Of this year's respondents, 48.6 percent are solo practitioners; 24.4 percent are partners in multidoctor practices; 28.1 percent are employee doctors (non-owners); and 0.7 percent identified their business status as "other."

On average, the doctors profiled here have been in practice for 14.3 years; their "active" clients—those who come in at least one time each year—number 3,652. Each week, these doctors see 75.4 clients and work 52.1 hours.

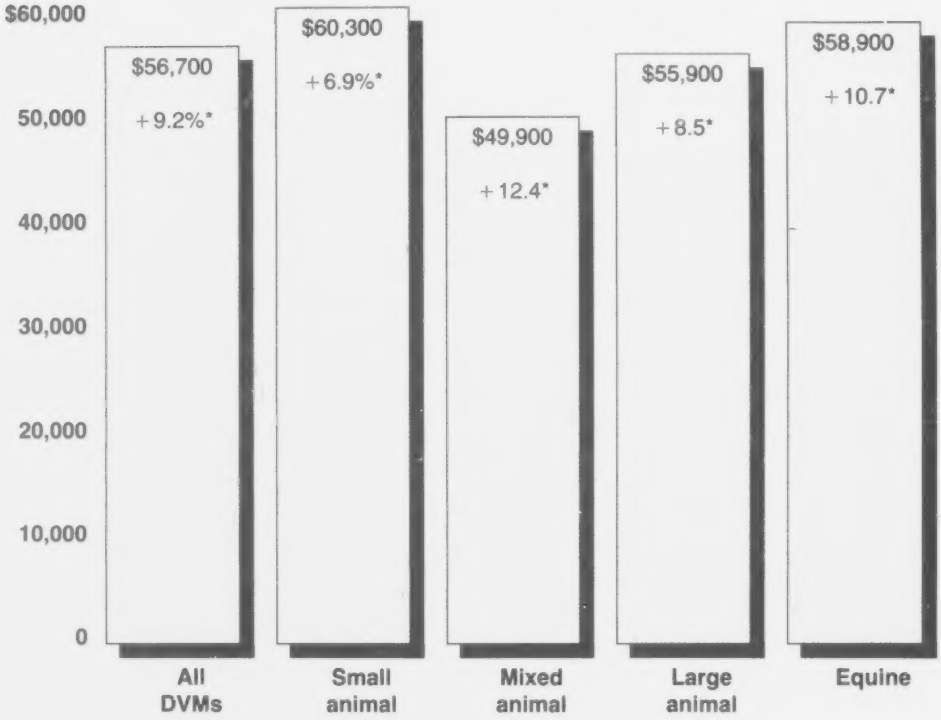
What are they asked?

In addition to demographic questions, the veterinarians are asked questions about their earnings, fees, and expenses. The earnings questions are as follows: 1. Which of the following best describes the 1990 gross income you *personally* produced for the practice?

2. Which of the following best describes your personal 1990 net income from practice? (Please include only your take-home pay, before personal taxes. Do not include profits you reinvest in the practice.) 3. Which of the following best describes your practice's total 1990 gross practice income?

For a detailed look at the collected data, see the charts that follow. The fees report will appear in the October issue; the expenses report is scheduled for November. ▶

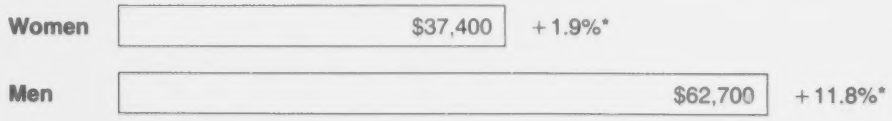
SMALL ANIMAL DOCTORS LEAD IN 1990 NET, MIXED ANIMAL MAKE GREATEST GAINS



A NOTE ON NET

Net income information is obtained via the following survey question: "Which of the following salary ranges best describes your personal 1990 net income from practice? (Please include only your take-home pay, before income taxes. Do not include profits you reinvest in practice.)"

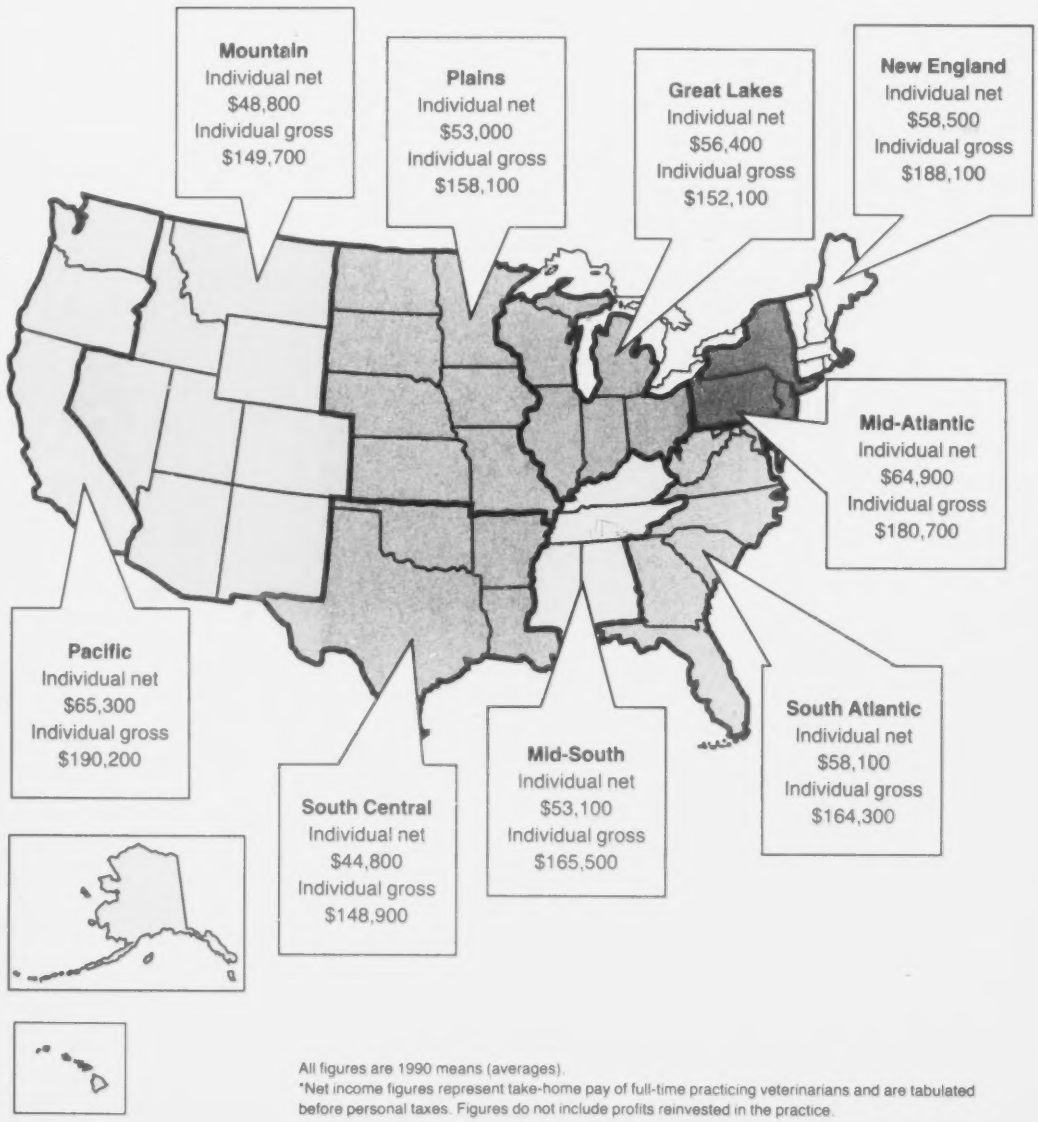
WOMEN DVMs' NET INCOME STILL OFF THE PACE



All figures are 1990 means (averages). Base: full-time practicing veterinarians.
*Percent increase over 1989 figures.

PACIFIC DVMs LEAD THE WAY IN NET AND GROSS INCOME

Providing ranges for respondents, we asked the following questions: *Which of the following best describes your personal 1990 net income from practice?** and *Which of the following best describes the 1990 gross income you personally produced for the practice?* The chart below shows the average answers provided by full-time practitioners of all practice types in the given regions.



All figures are 1990 means (averages).
*Net income figures represent take-home pay of full-time practicing veterinarians and are tabulated before personal taxes. Figures do not include profits reinvested in the practice.

WANT TO MAKE MORE MONEY? CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDE!

It's not the weather or the baseball standings; it's not even the economy that determines the profitability of your practice. The deciding factor is your *attitude*. Here's how to examine and change your mindset.

By Donald R. Dooley

What makes a practice profitable? Location? The economy? The weather? Maybe, but no matter what role these or other factors play, *nothing* influences the profitability of a veterinary practice more than the attitude of the veterinarians who work there. Your role is especially acute if you're the owner.

Do outside forces have any impact? Yes—but that impact also is determined by your attitude. For example, your *perception* of the local economy strongly influences your attitude. If you decide that clients can't pay you, you probably won't give them the option; instead you'll cut back on what you offer. Another veterinarian in the same economy may decide to offer full services *despite* the economy—and thrive. The difference is attitude, not the economy.

Profitability is determined by a simple equation: Gross income minus expenses equals profit. What most veterinarians don't realize, however, is that you actually *choose* your income and expenses, and therefore your profit. The amount you choose depends on your attitude.

Let me explain. Your attitude about veterinary medicine is a choice. You weren't born with this attitude; you developed it as you went along. The good news, then, is that you can change your attitude. If your practice isn't as profitable as you'd like it to be, you have the power to rethink your attitude, as do the other veterinarians in your practice.

Where to start? With your clients. I believe that the primary factor influencing the amount of income generated in your practice is your attitude toward your clients and their pets. Among the negative attitudes I've seen in practices throughout the country:

- Pets are a luxury that most

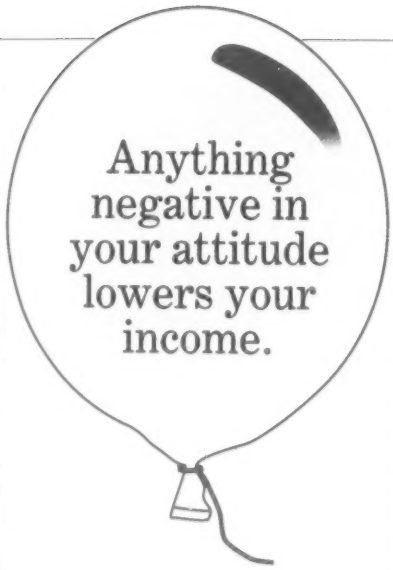
THE AUTHOR is a veterinary practice management consultant in Los Gatos, Calif.

pet owners truly can't afford.

- Many pet owners are irresponsible and can't afford proper care for their pets anyway.
- Pet owners care only about the cost of veterinary services, not about quality medicine.
- Most pet owners are elderly, unemployed, financially over-extended, or just plain poor.

I've also seen positive attitudes alive and well in some practices. Among them:

- Pet owners are financially able to pay for quality medicine.
- Many pet owners are very responsible, and want to provide their pets with the best health care available, regardless of cost.
- Pet owners aren't concerned about the cost; they just want what is best for their pets.
- Pet owners really are intelligent enough to understand and desire quality medicine when it's offered and explained to them.
- To most pet owners, pets are a real necessity, and they plan their finances so they can afford the best veterinary care available.



As you can probably tell, each of these attitudes comes with a price tag. If you subscribe to the first set of attitudes and believe that "pets have little value and clients can't afford them," you'll place little value—and low fees—on your own services. If you believe that pets have value and that their owners want to care for them, you'll place a much higher value on your services. The moral? The more positive the attitude, the more profitable your practice. Anything negative in your attitude toward clients and pets lowers your practice's gross income—and thus its profitability.

Taking pride in your medicine

The next step is to tackle the second part of the equation: your expenses. I believe that your attitude toward expenses indicates

PRACTICE INCOME

PRACTICE INCOME UP ACROSS THE BOARD

Practice type	Practice income*	Increase**	DVMs per practice
All DVMs	$433,000	19.0%	2.7
Small animal	$463,500	17.2%	2.8
Mixed animal	$384,100	20.3%	2.5
Large animal	$430,200	22.4%	2.7
Equine	$384,600	17.3%	2.7

All figures are 1990 means (averages). Base: full-time practicing veterinarians.
*Total gross practice income.
**Percent increase above 1989 figures.

the quality of medicine you wish to practice. If, for example, you are determined to keep your expenses to the bare minimum, you have effectively chosen to practice low-end medicine. Why? Because quality medicine *requires* high expenses. To practice such medicine, you need more and better equipment, a good staff, and high-quality drugs and supplies—all of which are expensive.

High-quality medicine also consumes more time: more time with clients to get better histories, more time with animals to confirm accurate diagnoses, and more time afterward to explain to clients what was and will be done to treat their animals. Re-checks and follow-up phone calls tick away even more time. This temporal expense to practice high-quality medicine means that fewer clients are seen by each doctor, and that the cost per client is greater.

You are, of course, free to practice the level of medicine you choose, within certain limitations. And I've found that most veterinarians have a comfort zone with regard to the quality of medicine they want to maintain. The bottom line, however, is that the higher the quality level, the greater the effort—and subsequently, the higher the cost.

Some practitioners set out to prove this theory false—to practice high-quality medicine and cut costs at the same time. Most of their efforts are short-lived. Why? Because these actions stem from contradictory attitudes. Eventually, either the quality of medicine will get better and the costs will go up, or the cost-cutting will reduce the quality of medicine. If the latter happens, the lower quality of medicine will become obvious to everyone except the doctor who is pretending to be diligent. You can practice good medicine or cheap medicine, but there really is no good, cheap medicine.

How does your attitude toward expenses and quality affect your profit? It doesn't. In fact, expenses probably have the least effect on profitability. A practice with high costs may have high or low profits; the same is true for a practice with lost costs. Generally speaking, however, higher profits, especially in dollars rather than percentages, are associated with high-quality, high-cost practices.

Working the equation

How, then, do you plug your attitude into a profit equation? Consider the chart below:

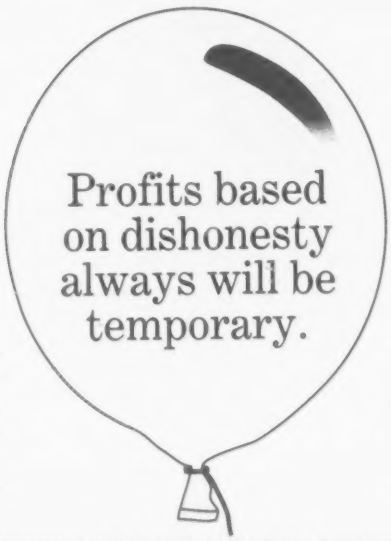
The best match-up is high-quality medicine and a very positive attitude toward clients and their pets. Not only will you profit, you'll enjoy yourself. Medical work you can be proud of, combined with clients you consider a pleasure, make for a great career. Unfortunately, only 2 to 5 percent of today's practitioners have chosen this combination and are enjoying the results.

What about the rest?

The vast majority of veterinarians have chosen the second combination of attitudes: They practice the best quality of medicine they're capable of, but their attitude toward clients and pets keeps them from charging adequately to support that quality. Compared to the rest of the economy and their own practice's potential, the result can best be described as a financial disaster. If you find yourself in this category, you can at

DOOLEY'S PROFIT EQUATIONS

High-quality medicine	+	Positive attitude toward clients and pets	=	High profits
High-quality medicine	+	Negative attitude toward clients and pets	=	Low profits, if any
Low-quality medicine	+	Positive attitude toward clients and pets	=	Temporarily high profits
Low-quality medicine	+	Negative attitude toward clients and pets	=	Adequate profits, for a while



least take some comfort in the size of the group.

Veterinarians who practice low-quality medicine but charge as if their clients would pay any price will make a decent profit —but only for a while. Why? Because the combination is dishonest. Charging a great deal for low-quality, low-cost medicine can't be maintained without pet owners eventually wising up. Profits based on dishonesty have been, and always will be, temporary. Fortunately, this combination of attitudes is rare in this profession.

A more honest approach is to provide lower quality medicine at

INDIVIDUAL INCOME

WHERE DO YOU STAND IN THE RANKINGS?

Individual gross income	Percent of practitioners
$250,000 or more	10.8
$200,000-$249,999	14.8
$180,000-$199,999	9.8
$160,000-$179,999	9.4
$150,000-$159,999	8.2
$130,000-$149,999	11.9
$110,000-$129,999	10.8
$90,000-$109,999	8.6
$70,000-$89,999	5.8
$60,000-$69,999	2.2
$50,000-$59,999	2.2
$30,000-$49,999	3.9
Less than $30,000	1.6
Mean: $166,300	

Individual net income	Percent of practitioners
$125,000 or more	5.3
$100,000-$124,999	6.2
$80,000-$99,999	5.7
$70,000-$79,999	8.9
$60,000-$69,999	6.8
$50,000-$59,999	10.7
$40,000-$49,999	13.7
$30,000-$39,999	21.2
$20,000-$29,999	14.1
$15,000-$19,999	4.5
Less than $15,000	3.0
Mean: $56,700	

All figures are 1990 means (averages).
Net income figures represent take-home pay of full-time practicing veterinarians and are tabulated before personal taxes. Figures do not include profits reinvested in the practice.
Gross income figures represent gross income produced by individual, full-time practitioners.

NET INCOME

PARTNERS EARN THE MOST

Joining forces with other veterinarians appears to pay off; partners in multidoctor practices report net income almost 18 percent higher than their solo counterparts.

Business status	Net income
Partner in multidoctor practice	$71,500
Solo practitioner	$60,700
Employee DVM (non-owner)	$36,800

All figures are 1990 means (averages).
Net income figures represent take-home pay of full-time practicing veterinarians and are tabulated before personal taxes. Figures do not include profits reinvested in the practice.

PRACTICE GROSS

INCOME GROWS WITH CLIENT BASE

The more clients, the bigger your practice gross. Here, "active" clients are defined as those who have visited the practice at least once in the last year.

Active clients	Total practice gross
Fewer than 1,000	$258,000
1,000–1,999	$286,400
2,000–2,999	$305,900
3,000–3,999	$432,800
4,000 or more	$682,500

All figures are 1990 means (averages).
Base: full-time practicing veterinarians.

a lower cost. That way, at least the attitudes are consistent and probably honest. If you claim to practice low-quality medicine and charge accordingly, you'll make a profit serving a small segment of the market. Your profit, however, will only be "adequate for a while" because this type of practice isn't very enjoyable. Not surprisingly, it attracts clients who support your attitude about "cheap clients and their stupid pets." Providing medicine you can't take pride in, and dealing with truly negative clients, isn't a pleasant way to spend a career.

Smile, and the world smiles...

If you want the highest possible profit and most enjoyment out of practice, examine your attitudes —then adjust them. If your attitude toward medicine is to provide high-quality medicine, leave it alone. Don't succumb to the temptation to lower the quality of medicine in order to reduce your expenses; doing so simply won't bring in enough profit to justify the loss of enjoyment you're likely to experience.

Keep in mind, too, that positive attitudes aren't necessarily easy. Even veterinarians who've chosen to practice high-quality medicine and be positive about clients have to work every day at maintaining those attitudes. They will tell you, however, that doing so is well worth the effort.

Remember, too, that your attitudes toward medicine, clients, and pets are acquired. They were either taught to you by mentors,

by experience, or by a combination of the two. It's also likely that your negative attitudes are based on beliefs that have no foundation. For example, most of what your mentors taught you about clients was based on *their* perceptions and confirmed by anecdotal evidence. One erroneous perception can launch a vicious cycle: Consider, for example, the doctor with a negative attitude about clients whose beliefs are reinforced whenever a client reacts negatively. The catch: The client is usually being *treated* negatively.

Unfortunately, established attitudes, like old habits, are hard to change. An improved practice, however, is pretty good incentive for putting forth the effort necessary to better your attitude toward clients. In most practices, simply choosing to upgrade the attitude toward clients will generate an additional $25,000 to $50,000 profit per veterinarian. If you make this choice and establish the corresponding attitude change, the increased income may continue for the rest of your career. Very few bad attitudes are worth preserving at that cost.

As I've said, practice income reflects your attitude toward clients. Practice expenses reflect your attitude toward medicine. By choosing these attitudes carefully and matching them correctly, you can dramatically increase both the profitability of your practice and your enjoyment of it. These choices aren't necessarily easy, but *all* practitioners are capable of making them. ■

NET INCOME

MORE TRAFFIC, MORE MONEY

As you might expect, veterinarians who see the most clients per week bring home the highest net income. Client visits include in-office visits as well as house and farm calls.

Net income	Client visits per week
Less than $30,000	57.8
$30,000–$49,000	70.6
$50,000–$69,000	76.9
More than $70,000	97.6

All figures are 1990 means (averages).
Net income figures represent take-home pay of full-time practicing veterinarians and are tabulated before personal taxes. Figures do not include profits reinvested in the practice.

GROSS INCOME/NET INCOME

WHAT YOU MAKE—AND WHEN

Years in practice	Gross	Net
Less than 2	$112,700	$31,200
3–5	$145,400	$35,700
6–10	$165,200	$49,400
11–20	$183,400	$67,000
21 or more	$173,300	$71,900

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Net income figures represent take-home pay of full-time practicing veterinarians and are tabulated before personal taxes. Figures do not include profits reinvested in the practice.
Gross income figures represent gross income produced by individual, full-time practitioners.

cine as much as you do. To train his staff, Dr. King shares information about exotic species, then teaches restraint techniques and treatment procedures.

Dr. Campbell helps her lay staff become comfortable with exotics by bringing some of the 30 birds she owns into the clinic. She also discusses with the two technicians on her staff such topics as forced feedings and medications.

Dr. Willard Nelson, who treats only exotics at The Exotic Pet and Bird Clinic in Kirkland, Wash., used his word processor to develop an operations manual, which consists of 75 sections. Topics range from declawing big cats to preparing for abdominal surgery on rabbits. The manual includes diagrams from other sources and acts as a ready-reference guide for Dr. Nelson and his staff members; its contents are alphabetically indexed according to subject, saving valuable staff time.

The doctors agree that the decision to add exotics to any practice is likely to place added demands on staff members. In response to her practice growth, Dr. Campbell plans to hire a third technician and double the number of receptionists from two to four.

Equipment requirements

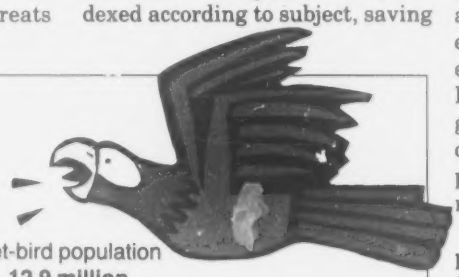
In most cases, exotic medicine also requires new equipment. For example, to work with the smaller exotics, such as birds and rodents, Dr. Stunkard says you'll need a gram scale. "We use a gram scale on anything under one to two pounds, so we can weigh it to the nearest tenth of a gram," he says.

Dr. Campbell says that avian practitioners also need incubators, mosquito hemastats, ophthalmic scissors, see-through surgical drapes, laproscopes, and X-rays with high-detail screens. If you plan to treat big cats, Dr. Nelson says that squeeze cages, dart guns, and pole syringes are a necessity.

Despite the requirements, standard veterinary equipment works just fine in some situations: A dog-size bathtub, for example, would work well for exotic necropsies, or to clean equipment, Dr. Nelson says. To handle the two or so cougar surgeries he performs a year, he uses standard dog tables, although the big cats hang over the sides a little. To restrain her feathered patients, Dr. Campbell uses paper towels, Handi Wipes, or lightweight sheets.

Clinic design is important, too. ▶

AVIAN OPPORTUNITY: ROOM TO FLY



Pet-bird population
12.9 million

Percent of households owning birds
5.7

Number of households owning birds
5.2 million

Percent of bird owners who obtain veterinary care
7.6

Annual veterinary expenditures for avians*
$26.2 million

Percent of bird owners who own a dog
65

Percent of bird owners who own a cat
47

Source: *The Veterinary Services Market for Companion Animals*, prepared for the AVMA by the Charles, Charles Research Group, 1988.
*Bird-exclusive owners only